



**State of the County Address
Harford County Executive David R. Craig
February 4, 2014**

Good evening Council President Boniface, Members of the County Council, and fellow citizens.

When I first took the oath of office as County Executive in July of 2005, Harford County was faced with a number of challenges. We had a deeply divided Council that was embroiled in a contentious Comprehensive Rezoning process, and which had just, for the first time in county history, been forced to fill a vacancy in the office of County Executive in the middle of a term.

As I said during my first swearing-in at the historic ceremonial court room, I recognized that I had not been elected by the people, but selected by the people's representatives. I pledged to work as hard as I could to earn their trust and their confidence.

Tonight, I stand before you eight and a half years later to give my ninth and final State of the County address. Having twice been elected by the citizens of this great county, and after weathering a myriad of challenges together, I can say with a great deal of pride and assuredness that the State of Harford County is strong, solid, stable, and successful.

As my administration completes its final year, I would like to reflect on our shared accomplishments, and discuss how key investments in infrastructure and the implementation of comprehensive management strategies have positioned Harford for success in the years to come.

Shortly after taking office, I identified the six pillars on which my administration would be built. These were: Public Safety, Education, Efficiency in Government, Economic Opportunity, Environmental Stewardship, and Quality Living.

Over the last eight-plus years, my Administration has endeavored to improve the county's performance in each one of these areas, and I believe that we have done that.

Public Safety – These are the services which our citizens hope they never need but which will touch all of us at some point. Our mission is to ensure that Harford County's Public

Safety services have the necessary tools and training to meet the County's growing demand for emergency services.

During my term in office, we have dealt with dozens of snowstorms, numerous hurricanes and tropical storms, and even an earthquake. Through the hard work of the county's emergency services staff and highways crews, and coordination from all of our departments and partner agencies, we were able to lead response and recovery efforts with a minimal loss in services.

Recognizing that the emergency needs of a growing Harford County needed to be reevaluated and measured against the service expectations of the twenty-first century, we commissioned the county's first Fire & EMS Master Plan, which was completed in 2009.

One of the key recommendations of that study was the creation of a Department of Emergency Services with a cabinet-level director to ensure the highest quality of service and to support the county's first responders. I am pleased that with the support of the County Council, and in working closely with the county's Volunteer Fire & EMS Service, the Department of Emergency Services was created early last year.

To complement the new department, we also created the Fire & EMS Commission to work with the volunteer fire service to bring greater accountability of government resources. And finally, to provide our emergency personnel with an adequate facility in which to coordinate response efforts, a new and very badly-needed Emergency Operations Center in Hickory is under construction and scheduled to open later this year.

As a former teacher I have seen first-hand the dangers of substance abuse among minors, and I also have seen that for many of our at-risk youths, the easiest drugs to abuse are those already inside their homes.

Through the hard work of the county's Office of Drug Control Policy and with help from the Sheriff's Office, the Maryland State Police, and the DEA, I am pleased to report that we have taken over five tons of unused prescription drugs off the streets, out of our waterways, out of medicine cabinets, and most importantly, out of the reach of those who could abuse them.

Education – Preparing now, Building for the future. This more than any of the other pillars of my administration holds a special place in my heart. It was a bittersweet day in 2005 when I retired from a job that I loved after 34 years in Harford County Public Schools in order to become County Executive.

I pledged that the county would make long-term investments in education by ensuring that children have a safe and stimulating environment in which to learn and to encourage and promote the availability of academic and technical programs that prepare all students to compete in the global marketplace.

With the help and support of the county council, we committed \$500 million – one half of a billion dollars – in school construction, school remodeling and modernizations, and other capital improvements. We forward-funded the construction of one brand new elementary school, as well as the replacement of three obsolete high schools and one elementary school with buildings capable of meeting the needs of Harford’s students and teachers for many decades into the future.

When I took office, there were 26 schools operating above capacity, and 94 portable classrooms in use. While declining enrollment has alleviated much of the problem, additional capacities made possible by capital investments by the county and a difficult but necessary round of elementary school redistricting by the Board of Education has ended the severe overcrowding that plagued our school system for the last two decades.

With respect to school funding, since I took office the county’s contribution to the Harford County Board of Education has increased by \$46 million. Sadly, the state has not been equal partners in this effort, and has not increased their share of education funding sufficiently enough to keep pace with the additional programing mandates and other requirements that the state itself places on our schools. In fact, they have passed the buck to the counties to cover expenses formerly the responsibility of the state such as teacher pensions. While there are many who feel that the county has not increased education funding sharply enough, given the economic realities we face, I am proud of the fact that we have increased county funding for our public schools by 35% per pupil since I took office and have never contributed less one year than we did the year before.

There are some who constantly speak, text, or blog about how some other counties have provided more funding. They miss the fact that the state is continually providing those counties more money than it does to us. Harford County is expecting an increase of less than \$900,000 from the state next year.

Prince George’s County’s Board of Education is expecting an increase of nearly \$47 million from the state, an increase over 50 times as large as ours. The state formulas which fund our schools are broken, misaligned, and disproportionate in nature. They unfairly and adversely impact the proper state funding our children have a right to and deserve.

With respect to higher education, Harford Community College is in the midst of a transformation from one of the state’s premier community colleges into an institution of higher learning that caters to the many different academic pursuits of our citizens.

Through a 2 + 2 partnership with Towson University, Harford students will be able to complete their Associate’s degrees at HCC, then walk right across Thomas Run Road and complete their Bachelor’s degree from Towson University on the college’s new West Campus. The expansion of Susquehanna Hall provided the county with a world-class venue for sporting and community events. Also, later this year HCC will open Darlington Hall for the college’s Nursing and Allied Health programs. County government has been proud to partner with the college during this exciting time.

Efficiency in Government – Governing smarter by identifying and developing best practices to maximize limited resources and to improve the delivery of services to citizens, businesses, and government agencies.

How we allocate the funds that the taxpaying citizens and businesses of this county is the very foundation of governance. Over the last eight years we have maintained, and indeed enhanced, important services.

At the same time, together with the county council, we have twice lowered property tax rates; tax relief which has saved county citizens \$50 million through fiscal year 2014.

Through hiring freezes, attrition, and retirement incentives, we have made county government leaner and more efficient. For employees under the county-managed pension system, we stabilized the system and brought its level of funding above the 60% standard, in the process making it sustainable and ensuring its long-term affordability.

We have adapted to changing needs internally in county government, such as when we folded the Department of Governmental & Community Relations into the Office of the County Executive, or when we elevated the Office of Information and Communications Technology to department status, bringing county government into the information age and making the automated processes of all departments more nimble and efficient.

The new Department of Information and Communications Technology, or ICT, has embarked upon moving the county off of the antiquated mainframe system of doing businesses and implementing a new Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system for general ledger, procurement, and budget management.

Also, by the time I leave office, ICT will have implemented the EnerGov system to assist departments with tracking and managing critical data related to business licensing, land management, and the permit process. ICT will also complete a new time and attendance system that will eliminate the manual leave slip process and improve employee timekeeping.

Other departments have worked to enhance and streamline the interaction that they have with our citizens and businesses by making more services available online. For example, the Department of Inspections, Licenses and Permits has created an online building permit program to allow the general public to access the status of pending applications. The Department of Treasury has made all property tax and water and sewer accounts accessible online, and bills can now be paid online using a credit card or electronic check.

Through these and other programs that have been implemented, we have transformed county government into an agency that is open, transparent, accessible, and more user-friendly.

Economic Opportunity – Fostering an environment within government that encourages financial opportunity and supports private sector ventures that diversify Harford's economic base in new and existing businesses.

We cannot discuss our economic successes without mentioning Base Realignment and Closure or BRAC, which was announced in 2005 and fully implemented in 2011. We were not merely the passive beneficiaries of decisions made in Washington. Rather, we were the first county to develop a plan to not only manage the changes brought by BRAC, but to leverage them to expand our economic base.

The combination of BRAC and the business-friendly environment we have developed in Harford County has seen the amount of Class-A office space in the county increase by over 1.5 million square feet, and the number of Harford-based defense contractors has increased from 28 to 137. In all, we have seen 6,000 new private sector jobs in Harford County according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Ridership on Harford Transit Link has doubled over the past three years alone, making getting to work and to college an accessible option and ensuring that all are afforded access to economic opportunity. Our county transit system has expanded to now operate nine routes, as well as a curb-to-curb service for the elderly and disabled.

While we celebrate the economic successes and opportunities available in the more urban parts of the county, we are equally proud of our rural heritage and our agricultural industry. Early in my term, I moved the county's agricultural economic development staff upstairs and into my office, giving the ag community a direct line of communication with me.

Since then, we have started a nationally-recognized "Buy Local" marketing campaign, which works to enhance the long-term viability of our agricultural industry and family farms. Through the Harford County Ag Marketing cooperative, we have provided grants totaling over \$1 million to the county's farmers for marketing and the development of emerging technologies.

We have also strengthened the county's farmland preservation program, which has preserved over 47,000 acres to date and ranks in the top 10 out of over 3,000 counties nationwide.

Through the successes of all of the businesses that call Harford County home, our local economy is strengthened. And as a result of our strong economy and through our conservative fiscal management, in 2010 we achieved an important first for Harford County – We earned the first Triple-A bond rating in our great county's history.

This distinction is not merely an acknowledgement of our strong financial management. It results in real and significant savings for our county and our taxpayers when we float bonds for capital projects like schools, roads, bridges, and fire houses; a lasting legacy which will benefit the county financially for many years into the future.

Environmental Stewardship - Protecting and preserving the County's environment through efficient use and reuse of its resources. Green initiatives are fine, but at the core of any true conservation program that a government undertakes must also be the conservation of financial resources – Will it save money?

Some have questioned whether we were right to create an Office of Sustainability but I look at the bottom line. And the fact is that the initiatives that the office have implemented to reduce energy costs, save paper and office supplies, and increase operational efficiency has far outweighed the minimal costs of having that office.

I was proud to support the effort to increase the cap on the county's Solar and Geothermal Tax Credit, allowing more citizens to take advantage of tax incentives for renewable energy.

In 2010, we instituted a highly-successful single-stream recycling program, providing convenience to the public and increasing our recycling rates, which were already among the highest in Maryland.

Despite our high rates of recycling, something must still be done with the remaining waste that cannot be recycled. With insufficient capacity remaining at the Harford Waste Disposal Center at Scarboro, and with the Army's intention to close the Waste-to-Energy incinerator located in the Edgewood Area of APG, a long term solution for our solid waste was needed.

After years of careful study and negotiation, last April we announced a long-term agreement that will allow for the disposal of our solid waste at the Eastern Sanitary Landfill in Baltimore County.

Quality Living – Cultivating life-enhancing amenities and necessary infrastructure that enriches the lives of county citizens and neighborhoods through sound planning practices, investments in parkland and recreation, and promotion of community spirit and cultural arts.

Over the last eight-plus years our Planning and Zoning department has undertaken rewrites of the zoning code, subdivision regulations, and sign code, completed two rounds of comprehensive rezoning, updated the Master Plan, and updated all major element plans, plus wrote the first-ever Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan. All were designed to improve the quality of life for all Harford Countians.

From a planning standpoint, we have allowed for growth and redevelopment within the development envelope while not giving in to pressures to extend urban development into the county's rural areas.

Harford County has always had one of the best Parks and Recreation programs in the state of Maryland. Together we have enhanced it over the last eight-plus years by building activity centers and community parks, and by adding nearly 500 acres to our Parks and Rec inventory for citizens of all ages to use and enjoy throughout the entire county. And, we have funded the installation of turf fields at three rec centers and at seven county high schools, with the remaining three high schools scheduled for turf installation by 2016.

We are bringing Harford County into the twenty-first century by making high-speed broadband available at facilities countywide through the Harford Metro Area Network or HMAN, laying more than 100 miles of fiber-optic cable for use by institutions, local businesses, and citizens. Work is proceeding ahead of schedule, and I am pleased to report that we will have a majority of the 100 sites operational by April.

Harford County is a county of communities. The different neighborhoods, rural villages, crossroads, towns, and cities in this county are all unique in their own right, but taken together they make this county what it is – a special place to live, work, and raise a family.

During my term we have taken great care to treat all communities fairly and to meet the needs of each area's residents.

In Joppa, together we built a new Southern Precinct for the Sheriff's Office and modernized Joppatowne Elementary.

The planned southern resource center is currently under design.

In Edgewood we rebuilt Edgewood High School and Deerfield Elementary School, and demolished the blighted and abandoned Washington Court Apartments to make way for revitalization.

In Abingdon we undertook a multi-million dollar expansion of the Abingdon Water Treatment Plant, which ensures that the county has adequate water capacity for the coming decades.

In Fallston we built the Roni Chenoweth Activity Center and completed the Edgeley Grove segment of the Ma & Pa Trail, and worked to finally move the new Youth's Benefit Elementary School closer to construction.

In Bel Air, we rebuilt Bel Air High School, and built Red Pump Elementary, alleviating severe overcrowding at elementary schools in the greater Bel Air area. We also built the Patterson Mill Substation of the Bel Air Volunteer Fire Company, the first station to be fully-funded by the county.

In Northern Harford County, we rebuilt North Harford High School, built Rutledge Community Park in Jarrettsville, built the Jarrettsville Library, and expanded the Whiteford Library.

In Churchville we expanded the Churchville Recreation Complex, and completed the Cedar Lane Regional Park in Creswell.

In Aberdeen we purchased Rock Glenn Park and worked with SHA to purchase rights of way and to complete much-needed intersection upgrades along Rt. 22, Rt. 715 and Rt. 7. And, we have strongly supported the City of Aberdeen in addressing their water needs.

And in Havre de Grace we built the Havre de Grace Activity Center, and are moving forward on the High School and new library.

Harford County is also a county of people.

It is the hard-working and dedicated county employees who plow our roads when it snows, who answer the call when you dial 911, who maintain our ballfields and parks, and who greet you with a smiling face and a pleasant attitude when you need assistance.

It is all of the impressive professionals who have led one of the county's departments and whose advice and counsel I have valued as members of my cabinet over the last eight-plus years.

It is also the employees of the other agencies of this county – the teachers and administrators of our school system, our librarians and library support staff, the deputies, correctional officers, and staff of the Sheriff's Office, and the legal professionals who work for the State's Attorney's Office or for the Circuit Court.

And lastly, Harford County is the citizens who volunteer to safeguard, defend, and improve the lives of all of the county's residents. The volunteer fire fighters and EMS technicians. The citizens who volunteer their time at a senior center or for a nonprofit organization like SARC, the Humane Society, or the Harford Center. Or those who give their time as youth sports coaches, as PTA parents, or as members of a county advisory board or community council.

That is Harford County. The credit for what has been achieved over the years belongs to all of you, and I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

To the members of the County Council, it has been a pleasure to work with all of you for two terms. Each of you is a passionate advocate for your communities and for the citizens that you represent.

While we may not have always agreed, and although there have been instances where consensus in the community was not attainable, let no one claim that we did not, or do not, put first and foremost our love of this county and our common desire to pass it on in a better state to our children and grandchildren.

So, what do I hope people will say and remember about these past nine years? That we were not afraid to lead, that we were not afraid to sometimes make unpopular decisions knowing there was a bigger picture at play, that we acted with great purpose, and that this county is better positioned for the future. And, may they also say that we left this great community of ours in good standing for the next generation of leaders.

May God continue to bless this great nation, our state, and Harford County.

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